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From:	Deepwater Horizon Response External Affairs <donotreply@deepwaterhorizonresponse.com>
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Date:	07/20/2010 07:43 AM
Subject:	Deepwater Horizon Response Daily AM Media Clips, July 20, 2010

DEEPWATER HORIZON RESPONSE

N E W S O F T H E D A Y

Media Monitoring Report	Prepared by Public Affairs
July 20, 2010 AM	Deepwater Horizon Response

News in Summary

- Oil and gas are leaking from the cap on BP's ruptured oil well, but the cork will stay in place for now, Admiral Allen said. The leaks aren't "consequential," according to Allen, relieving concerns that they are a sign the cap is creating too much pressure underground. BP can continue testing the cap, meaning keeping it shut, for at least another 24 hours.

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EMERGING ISSUES

BP Well Stays Capped for Another Day, Slick Shrinks in Size (ABC News)

July 20, 2010
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The stacking cap holding back oil from BP's broken well has sprung small leaks, but the government decided to allow the integrity test to continue for another 24 hours, keeping the gusher contained.
The torrent of oil has now been shut down for a fourth straight day, but many are concerned about the steady flow of bubbles signaling several leaks in the giant, 150,000-pound device cap.
"What we're looking for is methane gas, which is a precursor of oil rising from the water," National Incident Cmdr. Adm. Thad Allen said today.
Concerned government scientists continue to monitor the well, and deep sea robots are now taking samples and scanning the ocean floor for seismic activity. They're even monitoring the temperature around the well. It's currently a frigid 40 degrees Fahrenheit, even after being warmed by leaking oil, which gushes up at 300 degrees Fahrenheit.
One of the leaks that has been observed seems to be a natural seepage, located about two miles away from the well on the sea bed.
Leaks Common on Sea Floor, Expert Says
"The Gulf is loaded with seeps of oil and gas, and that's one of the challenges that everyone is facing here," said Chris D'Elia, the director of the International Ocean Institute. "What is actual and what is not?"
Other tiny leaks are found on the new stacking cap itself, but they're still far too minor to warrant unsealing the cap and unleashing the geyser of oil once again.
Still, the government made clear over the weekend that leaks are a major concern.
When BP downplayed the threat of leaks, Adm. Allen penned a blistering letter demanding more and faster information, including whether BP intends to keep the well shut.

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Americans Still Ask, 'Who's in Charge?'
Adm. Allen's letter taps into a sore point for the Obama Administration, which is still struggling to manage the public's perception. One of the most frequent searches on the web site Google News is, "Who's in charge?"
Critics maintain that the government has too little say and too few resources.
"The government is reliant on BP," said Ian MacDonald, an oceanographer with Florida State University. "BP provides all the remote operated submersibles, the ROV's. The government, if it chose to, could charter an ROV and have their own source of information and their own ability to act in the situation."
But 91 days into this disaster, the fact remains that at least for now, the blown out well has been capped. Oil is no longer flowing, and ships that were frantically burning off oil and gas at the spill site are now suddenly quiet.
Maps Show Slick Shrinking
Maps of the oil slick show that in the last few days, it has shrunk considerably, following months of relentless growth. In mid-June the slick was the size of Kansas, but today it's about the size of Tennessee.
"We're very optimistic," Billy Nungesser (R), president of Plaquemines Parish, told Fox News on Sunday. "We see light at the end of the tunnel. It's a very long tunnel, but today we're making progress."
Officials can only be grateful that the slick has started to shrink, but it's hardly due to efforts to clean it up. The more than 400 skimmers deployed to fight the spill have had very little impact, catching about 80,000 barrels of the estimated 5 million that spewed into the Gulf of Mexico.
Still, though, skimmers remain the best line of defense for the fragile coastline, with oil still headed ashore.
Allen: Still a Lot of Work to Be Done
"We still have a lot of work ahead of us," Adm. Allen acknowledged today. "And we still have a heck of a lot of oil out in the Gulf of Mexico."
While oil has hit beaches and marshes in four states, there is now no sign of oil along the Florida panhandle. Scientists also say that the very small amount of oil in Lake Pontchartrain, the tidal bay north of New Orleans, has dispersed and disappeared.
Then, there's the loop current that threatened to catch and carry the oil through the Florida Keys, up the coast to Miami and beyond. Thankfully, it hasn't happened. The current split into two, with the northern portion swirling endlessly in the Gulf, and the southern portion flowing over 100 miles from the spill zone.
It's "a current that's almost independent of the rest of the water around it, and it's tough to get that oil into it," said Joe Bastardi, a meteorologist for AccuWeather.
Still, none of the good news means that the Gulf has dodged the proverbial bullet of an environmental disaster. Great unknowns lurk below the surface.
"We really won't know [the environmental impact] for several years," said Dr. John Lopez, a coastal scientist with the Lake Pontchartrain Foundation. "It would probably take a minimum of three years for various species to grow to a size where maybe they would be harvested and begin to recognize trends that they've been impacted."
Even though the flow has stopped, it remains a disaster on a scale never seen before.
Cap on Oil Well Kept Shut Despite Leak, Seepage (Associated Press)

July 20, 2010
Oil and gas are leaking from the cap on BP's ruptured oil well but the cork will stay in place for now, the federal government's point man on the spill said Monday.

The leaks aren't "consequential," retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen said, relieving concerns that they are a sign the cap is creating too much pressure underground. That could mean the cap that's stopped oil since Thursday would have to be opened.

Allen said BP could continue testing the cap, meaning keeping it shut, for at least another 24 hours. He said BP must keep rigorously monitoring for any signs that this test could worsen the overall situation.

If there was a quick rise in pressure, the well would be vented immediately to keep from creating leaks deep underground, Allen said.

Allen repeated Monday that the next step wasn't clear.

"I'm not prepared to say the well is shut in until the relief well is done. There are too many uncertainties," he said.

The concern all along — since pressure readings on the cap weren't as high as expected — was a leak elsewhere in the well bore, meaning the cap may have to be reopened to prevent the environmental disaster from becoming even worse and harder to fix.

With the newly installed cap keeping oil out of the Gulf, this weekend offered a chance for the oil company and government to gloat over their shared success — the first real victory in fighting the spill.

Instead, the two sides have spent the past two days disagreeing over what to do with the undersea machinery holding back the gusher.

"We had some concerns ... about commitments that BP had made that we did not feel that they were adequately living up to in terms of that monitoring," said White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said. "That was dealt with last night on a call that lasted late into the evening."

The apparent disagreement began to sprout Saturday when Allen said the cap would eventually be hooked up to a mile-long pipe to pump the crude to ships on the surface. But early the next day, BP chief operating officer Doug Suttles said the cap should stay clamped shut to keep in the oil until a permanent fix.

The company very much wants to avoid a repeat of millions of gallons of oil spewing from the blown well for weeks, watched live across the country on underwater video.

If the valves are kept closed, as BP wants, it's possible that no more oil will leak into the Gulf of Mexico. Work on a permanent plug is moving steadily, with crews drilling into the side of the ruptured well from deep underground. By next week, they could start blasting in mud and cement to block off the well for good.

But the government is worried that the cap on the well is causing oil and gas to leak out elsewhere, which could make the sea floor

unstable and cause the well to collapse. That's why federal officials want to pump the crude to ships on the surface. That would require opening the well for a few days to relieve pressure before the pipes could be hooked up, letting millions more gallons of oil spill out in the interim.

In Grand Isle, La., they are not waiting for answers, reports CBS News correspondent Kelly Cobiella. The boom that has been protecting the beach for months is being taken apart, stacked up and moved out for tourists. Tar-stained sand is being scrubbed clean, and the town's fire chief is now fighting to save the tourist season instead of fending off oil.

"It's not over but we are moving forward," said Grand Isle Fire Chief Aubrey Chaisson. "There is daylight at the end of the tunnel."

If there is a problem, that well will have to be reopened and oil could gush into the Gulf for a few days before containment ships could be reconnected.

BP Weighs New Way to Kill Gulf Well (Wall Street Journal)

By BEN CASSELMAN , SUSAN DAKER And ANGEL GONZALEZ

July 20, 2010

Oil giant BP PLC was Monday considering yet another method to kill its ruptured Gulf of Mexico oil well amid concerns that the cap it installed last week could be allowing oil and gas to seep out the sides.

A controlled burn is seen in the distance behind the Seadrill West Sirius platform, an ultra-deepwater semi-submersible rig assigned by Devon Energy and Seadrill to operate for BP, near the source of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Meanwhile, a federal panel investigating the disaster heard that the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig suffered a series of power outages and seized-up computers in the months before it exploded.

BP's new containment cap has stopped the flow of oil since Thursday, but with the well now sealed at the top, government officials are worried that oil and gas could now be escaping elsewhere.

Pressure tests have been inconclusive, but BP says the reservoir has depleted to the point where the company could use a new method of closing off the well by pumping heavy drilling fluid into the top—an operation similar to the "top kill" procedure that failed in May.

If successful, the procedure could kill the well permanently more quickly than the relief wells that BP is drilling, which have long been seen as the only permanent solution to what is now one of the worst-ever environmental disasters in the U.S.

But few of BP's attempts to staunch the flow of oil have gone according to plan since its Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded in the Gulf on April 20. In a letter to BP on Monday, Thad Allen, the retired Coast Guard admiral heading the government's response to the spill, urged the company to keep its focus on the relief wells, which are due to be completed by mid August.

BP will be making a decision about pursuing the option over the next couple of days, said Kent Wells, a senior vice president for BP. The company still intends to drill the relief well even if it proceeds with the newest plan, called a static kill, to confirm that the leaking well is dead. The first of two relief wells is currently "looking directly" at the well, and will be able to intersect it at the end of July, Mr. Wells said.

Oil-spill responders detected leaks around the cap and about two miles from the well. The leak around the cap may not be "significant," according to Adm. Allen, although it is causing a formation of hydrates, crystal-like compounds that indicate the presence of oil or gas.

The seafloor leak, discovered during seismic testing and sonar analysis, is believed to be unrelated to the well cap, Adm. Allen said.

BP has been working for 13 weeks to contain the gusher, which at one point was spewing up to 60,000 barrels of oil a day into the Gulf of Mexico.

Also Monday, a federal investigative panel turned its attention to BP's contractors on the rig attached to the well, the Deepwater Horizon.

The rig's chief engineer, Stephen Bertone, testified during a panel hearing in Kenner, La., that the Deepwater Horizon suffered a series of maintenance problems in the months before the well exploded.

The revelations by the engineer could prompt new scrutiny of Transocean Ltd., the offshore drilling giant that owned and operated the Deepwater Horizon rig.

Mr. Bertone, a Transocean employee, told investigators that the Deepwater Horizon had lost power completely one time and had lost some power on several other occasions before the disaster. It also had had problems with one of its thrusters, an engine that helps hold the rig in place above the well, for roughly eight months before the incident.

A key computer used to monitor drilling operations had frozen repeatedly, Mr. Bertone said, although a new hard drive apparently resolved the problem. He also said that he and a subordinate had requested more workers to help with maintenance. He didn't say whether he got the help he asked for, but said he didn't believe maintenance problems contributed to the disaster on April 20.

Transocean said the Deepwater Horizon was properly staffed and maintained and had a strong safety record in recent years.

Investigators have identified more than 20 "anomalies" in the rig's last two days that could have contributed to the disaster, according to a document written by the panel's investigators and reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

Small leaks spring at BP oil well; cap to stay in place for now (Washington Post)

By Steven Mufson and David S. Hilzenrath

July 20, 2010

New problems arose in the struggle to contain the Gulf of Mexico oil spill as bubbles and seepage appeared in four areas around the damaged BP well, but Obama administration and company officials agreed to keep the new well cap closed for at least 24 more hours as they weigh the gravity of the developments.

Meanwhile, at a hearing in Louisiana, attorneys for crew members of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig did battle with one another and members of a government panel investigating the April 20 explosion while revealing new details about fateful choices made hours before the blowout.

In Washington, the Interior Department moved to defuse tensions with shallow-water drilling firms and Gulf Coast lawmakers over how to speed up the permit process.

BP said that one of the seepage areas, less than two miles from the Macondo well, is a natural leak not linked to the well. Retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad W. Allen, the national incident commander, said concerns are focused on other "anomalies" -- some seepage within several hundred yards of the well and bubbles appearing near the original blowout preventer on the sea floor.

In addition, video provided by BP showed drops of oil and gas leaking from a piece of the new containment cap just below three rams designed to cut off the flow from the well. The leak has caused the formation of some hydrates -- slushlike crystals of natural gas and water that torpedoed earlier containment efforts. But, Allen said, "we do not believe this is consequential at this time."

Allen and, in another briefing, BP senior executive Kent Wells said the company might make a second attempt to kill the well by shooting drilling mud into the blowout preventer. An earlier attempt was aborted, but Wells said stopping the flow even temporarily would make killing the well easier.

Consequences

The latest events added to tension that had begun to dissipate over the weekend as the new containment cap appeared to be holding fast without causing problems. And the developments highlighted the unappealing tradeoffs associated with every decision carried out a mile below the sea surface.

Allen said that the four-day-old effort to close the well had complicated the prospects of containing the spill by channeling oil through four lines to surface ships. He said that if the new cap must be opened, it would take several days to make sure sand would not clog the lines, to finish building flexible riser pipes to the surface and to hook up surface ships designed to suck oil from the cap. During that time, oil and gas would flow into the gulf.

But with the cap closed, the risk of broader damage to the well itself and surrounding geological structures looms large. If the well is so damaged that oil and gas is leaking throughout, the hydrocarbons could seep into surrounding rock formations high above the reservoir and then into the sea. Or they could come out the top of the well. Vessels using seismic equipment were scouring the area for evidence of such seepage, but their presence kept other ships from getting close enough to finish building the infrastructure that would be needed if the cap were opened.

Meanwhile, pressure in the well continued to rise Monday, albeit slowly, reaching 6,811 pounds per square inch, Allen said in the late afternoon. He said the pressure was rising about one pound per hour.

This, too, has triggered debate among BP and U.S. officials, who had expected the pressure to hit 8,000 psi and who thought that lower pressure readings would be a sign that oil and gas was leaking into rock formations through damaged well equipment. But because of the steady increases in pressure, BP and government scientists are wondering whether so much oil and gas had been spilled already that the pressure in the partly depleted reservoir has been reduced.

The fight to control the well was just one piece of the picture Monday.

In Kenner, La., a new round of hearings on the Deepwater Horizon explosion opened Monday with members of a government panel pressing the chief rig engineer to expand on an earlier statement describing the chaotic final moments on the burning rig.

In that statement, which has not been made public, Stephen Bertone said that the captain of the rig screamed at a crew member for pressing either a distress button or a disconnect button and, referring to an injured man on a stretcher, said, "Leave him."

But at Monday's session of the joint U.S. Coast Guard and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, Bertone said, "I honestly don't feel anything in that statement needs to be changed," and his attorney, Stephen D. London, resisted efforts to get him to describe the scene anew.

Panel co-chairman Hung M. Nguyen of the Coast Guard said that the only way Bertone could avoid answering questions from the panel was to invoke his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. Nonetheless, the panel permitted Bertone to leave the witness table after about four hours of testimony without explicitly invoking the Fifth Amendment or elaborating.

The skirmish was the first of what could be several tests for the government panel. Two key BP officials who had been scheduled to testify this week canceled for medical reasons, including Donald Vidrine, one of the Deepwater Horizon's "company men," as those who represent BP on rigs are known.

The hearing did produce some new details.

One witness described how BP mixed a large quantity of two chemicals and injected them into the well to flush out drilling mud. But the chemicals aren't usually mixed together, and the injection of more than 400 barrels of dense, gray fluid were about double the quantity normally used for the task, said Leo Lindner, a drilling fluid specialist for contractor M-I Swaco.

The reason for the action: BP had hundreds of barrels of the two chemicals on hand and needed to dispose of it, Lindner testified. By first flushing it into the well, the company could take advantage of an exemption in an environmental law that otherwise would have prohibited the discharge of the hazardous waste into the gulf, he said.

"It's not something we've ever done before," he said.

Improvising

Despite assurances from a BP specialist, Lindner conducted his own improvised experiment the night before the explosion to double-check. He mixed a gallon of one substance with a gallon of the other. When the well exploded, a fluid that fit its general description rained down on the rig. Bertone said part of the rig was covered with an inch or more of material that he said resembled "snot."

Bertone also testified that a variety of maintenance problems afflicted the Deepwater Horizon in the months before it exploded and sank, killing 11 workers and triggering the massive spill.

A BP audit of the rig in September found 390 maintenance issues that had not been resolved, BP lawyer Richard Godfrey said while questioning Bertone. Godfrey said the auditors estimated that it would take 3,545 hours to make repairs.

Bertone said many of the items listed in the September audit were based on a new maintenance program that was not tailored or relevant to the rig.

He testified that the computer on a chair used by the rig's driller had been malfunctioning and that its hard drive had been replaced. When the computer froze, it rendered the driller blind to conditions in the well unless he switched chairs. In addition, one of the rig's thrusters had been having problems for eight months, he said, and the rig had experienced partial blackouts.

Ronnie Penton, an attorney for one of the rig workers, said in an interview after the hearing that the double-sized dose of fluid skewed a crucial test of pressure in the well just hours before the blowout. Based on the test BP concluded it was safe to continue displacing the heavy mud from the well in favor of much lighter sea water.

Seepage found near capped leak (Advocate)

July 20, 2010

The government approved keeping BP’s well closed Monday for another 24 hours with the oil giant saying if the well stays closed long enough, it may try another top kill even though an earlier attempt failed.

Retired U.S. Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen also confirmed that there was an oil seep found in the Gulf of Mexico floor several miles away from the well, and leaking oil and gas was reported near the well.

Allen said neither presented a problem for the well integrity test or the cap.

Allen, however, said he was still concerned about the continued low pressures that engineers have found in the well on the fourth day of its well integrity test.

“Approval of continuation of the well integrity is conditionbased,” he said. “A decision will be made every 24 hours on whether it should continue.”

BP’s Kent Wells, vice president of exploration, and Allen both said Monday that the company is considering trying to kill the flow of gas and oil in the 2.5-mile-deep well with a top kill.

That procedure works by inserting drilling mud into the top of the well through the blowout preventer. The drilling mud, a synthetic liquid that is heavier than the oil, would be used to overcome the flow of oil. Usually, a top kill is followed with cement seals placed inside the well.

A top kill attempt failed in May when engineers became concerned that they were damaging the well bore by pumping drilling mud into the well at a high velocity.

During that attempt, the well was still leaking, Wells said.

A top kill on a closed-in well would be “much different” and much easier to execute than the one BP tried when it was still leaking, Wells said.
One of the main differences, he said, is drilling mud would not have to be pumped into a closed well at high velocity. It could be put into the well slowly, eliminating the threat of further damaging the well bore.
Wells said the idea is still in the planning and discussion stages and no decision will be made for at least a couple of days.
But Wells said even if the company decides to try a top kill, the relief well is still considered the only way to permanently kill the well.
Also on Monday, Allen said that an oil and gas leak and possibly methane gas were detected near the well head.
“There is no indication at this time this is any indication of a significant problem in the well bore, but we are running every one of these anomalies down,” Allen said.
Also, oil was found seeping from the Gulf’s floor about two miles from the well head, Allen said.
“A lot of oil that’s formed naturally by the Earth ends up escaping or leaking to the surface in the form of natural seeps and, yes, there are a lot of these all around the world,” he said.
An oil and gas leak detected on the newly installed sealing cap was small and should not impact the test, Allen said.
Gas bubbles found near the well head also were being tested to determine whether it was methane gas. Allen said methane gas is associated with the release of hydrocarbons or oil.
In a rough field test conducted Monday, Wells said, the bubbles only had about 15 percent of methane gas in their makeup, which indicates the bubbles were a natural occurrence.
More sophisticated laboratory tests were being run on the bubbles, he said.
The well was closed Thursday so the company could conduct the well integrity test, which requires the well to be closed so pressure can be built and maintained inside the well.
The pressure build up allows BP to determine whether there is a leak in the well. The company said a high pressure reading would indicate there is no leak, and a lower pressure reading would indicate there could be a leak in the well bore.
The pressure never reached the high pressure level — between 7,500 and 9,000 pounds per square inch — expected by Allen and the company.
Instead, Allen reported the pressure had only climbed to 6,811 psi Monday.
But Allen said the pressure reading did not necessarily indicate a leak. He said scientists and engineers have a split opinion on what is causing the low pressure.
Some engineers have said they believe there may be a leak while others have said they believe the oil level in the reservoir may be getting low, causing the lower pressure readings.
Allen said that the well’s pressure was still rising Monday at 1 psi per hour, which also points to the well not having a leak.
The fear has always been that the well bore was damaged when the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded April 20, killing 11 workers.
If the well bore is damaged, oil could be leaking out the sides of the well hole and into the rock strata. Pressure on the well could make the leak worse, causing the oil to seep up through the Gulf floor.
Allen indicated he was irritated with the company Sunday for not reporting the seeping oil, or the oil and gas leaks, or finding out what was causing the problem quickly enough.
He sent a tersely worded letter to BP on Sunday chiding the company for not immediately reporting the problems near the well site to government scientists.
“When seeps are detected, you are directed to marshal resources, quickly investigate, and report findings to the government in no more than four hours,” Allen wrote to Bob Dudley, BP’s chief managing director.
Later Sunday, BP and the government held a teleconference, Allen said.
“During the conversation, the federal science team got the answers they were seeking and the commitment from BP to meet their monitoring and notification obligations,” Allen said.
Allen also reminded the company who is in charge.
“At any moment, we have the ability to return to the safe containment of the oil on the surface until the time the relief well is completed and the well is permanently killed,” Allen’s letter said.
Wells said Monday that BP is juggling several projects at one time: the well integrity test; continuing to build up its oil collection system so it’s ready in case the cap is reopened on the well; and drilling relief wells.
As a result, Wells said the company was having trouble meeting the monitoring level that Allen said he wanted.
Allen said he asked BP to perform pressure, sonar, acoustic, visual, temperature, seismic and other tests to ensure there is no problem with the well bore.
But Wells said the company is now meeting all of the monitoring requirements.

Feds: Leaks and seepage not a major concern at this point (Associated Press)

July 19, 2010 at 2:15 PM

NEW ORLEANS -- BP's broken well was leaking oil and gas again Monday for the first time since the company capped it last week, but the Obama administration's spill chief said it was no cause for alarm. The stopper was left in place for now.
Ever since the cap was used to bottle up the oil last week, engineers have been watching underwater cameras and monitoring pressure and seismic readings to see whether the well would hold or spring a new leak, perhaps one that could rupture the seafloor and make the disaster even worse.
Small amounts of oil and gas started coming from the cap late Sunday, but "we do not believe it is consequential at this time," retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen said.
Also, seepage from the seafloor was detected over the weekend less than two miles away, but Allen said it probably has nothing to do with the well. Oil and gas are known to ooze naturally from fissures in the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.
At an afternoon briefing in Washington, Allen said BP could keep the cap closed at least another 24 hours, as long as the company remained alert for leaks.
BP and the government had been at odds over the company's desire to simply leave the cap in place and employ it like a giant cork in a bottle until a relief well being drilled deep underground can be used to plug up the well permanently.
Allen initially said his preference was to pipe oil through the cap to tankers on the surface to reduce the slight chance that the buildup of pressure inside the well would cause a new blowout. That plan would require releasing millions more gallons of oil into the ocean for a few days during the transition -- a spectacle BP apparently wants to avoid.
On Monday, Allen budged a bit, saying unless larger problems develop, he's not inclined to open the cap.
Also on the table: Pumping drilling mud through the top of the cap and into the well bore to stop up the oil flow. The idea is similar to the failed top kill plan that couldn't overcome the pressure of the geyser pushing up.
BP said it could work now because there's less oil to fight against, but it wasn't clear how such a method would affect the cap's stability.
Allen said the relief well was still the plan for a permanent fix.
BP and the government are still trying to understand why pressure readings from the well are lower than expected. Allen offered two possible explanations: The reservoir the oil is gushing from is dwindling, or there is an undiscovered leak somewhere down in the well.

"I'm not prepared to say the well is shut in until the relief well is done," which is still several weeks away, Allen said. "There are too many uncertainties."
BP and the Coast Guard learned that lesson the hard way after they initially said no oil was coming from the site of the Deepwater Horizon rig after it exploded April 20, killing 11 workers. Even after it became clear there was a leak, the company and its federal overseers drastically underestimated its size for weeks.
Robert Carney, a Louisiana State University expert on biological oceanography, said the seepage is far enough away from the well that it could be occurring naturally.
"You have little bubbles rising up from the bottom frequently; that's the methane gas" he said. "Oil would be a little black dot, more difficult to see. But both escape into the water regularly."
One other possibility: There are around 27,000 abandoned wells in the Gulf. One of them is within two miles of BP's blowout, and there is a second well in the area that is not in production.
While officials gave no indication that the seepage was from another well, they're not checked for leaks, an Associated Press investigation showed this month.
Work on a permanent plug is moving steadily, with crews drilling into the side of the ruptured well from deep underground. By next week, they could start blasting in mud and cement to block off the well for good. Killing the well deep underground works more reliably than bottling it up with a cap.
Somewhere between 94 million and 184 million gallons have gushed into the Gulf over the past three months in one of America's worst environment crises.
BP said the cost of dealing with the spill has now reached nearly $4 billion. The company said it has made payments totaling $207 million to settle claims for damages. Almost 116,000 claims have been submitted and more than 67,500 payments have been made. BP stock was down slightly Monday.

Gas seeps not necessarily a problem, because pressure in oil well rising, officials say (Times-Picayune)

July 19, 2010, 7:38 PM

Scientists have discovered four gas "seeps" at or near BP's blown-out Macondo well since Saturday, but at this point, the federal government doesn't believe they're a problem and will allow BP to leave the cap on the well for another 24 hours while it watches for signs of ruptures in the underground portion of the well.
Bubbles have been spotted on the seabed about three kilometers away from the well, a few hundred meters from the well, at the base of the original blowout preventer on the well, and coming out of a gasket in the flange on the capping stack that was installed last week.
Retired Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen, the National Incident Commander, said he doesn't believe that the faraway bubbles are related to the Macondo well, and the capping stack bubbles simply indicate that the new device doesn't have a good seal in one spot, so that leaves the nearby spot on the seabed and the base of the blowout preventer as areas of concern.
Bubbles can indicate pathways where oil could soon follow. But Allen said BP and federal officials don't believe the bubbles are problematic at this point because the pressure continues to rise in the well -- albeit slowly -- and seismic, acoustic and sonar monitoring in the area aren't detecting any sudden shifts that would indicate the well blowing out underground.
"The small seepages, at least at this point, do not indicate that there is any threat to the well bore," Allen said.
Allen's comments Monday afternoon capped what seems to have been a tense period between BP and the federal government, which is overseeing its response. On Sunday, Allen sent BP a terse letter ordering the company to disclose any signs of trouble within four hours of finding them and to have a plan ready for how to relieve pressure in the well immediately. Late Sunday night, BP canceled the 7:30 a.m. briefing it had been holding for the past week, and on Monday morning, refused to acknowledge the seeps that Allen had written about in his letter. The first real descriptions of the seeps Monday came not from the Coast Guard or BP, but from a White House briefing.
While Allen's tone was optimistic Monday afternoon, the fact that the government is granting BP permission to keep the cap in place that has been preventing oil from escaping into the Gulf of Mexico since last Thursday in 24-hour increments is a sign that scientists still aren't fully comfortable that they understand what's going on with the well. Pressure has been rising in the well, which is a good sign, indicating that the well may be sealed. But the readings are much lower than expected -- 6,811 pounds per square inch and rising an inch an hour -- igniting a debate over whether the well may have a leak somewhere or has simply lost its initial oomph after flowing for 81 days.
Bill Gale, a California engineer and industrial explosion expert who is a member of the Deepwater Horizon Study Group, said that BP probably wants the cap to remain in place since it eliminates the PR problem of oil billowing through the water on the ROV cameras, and stops oil that eventually will be tallied as the basis for fines. The government, it appears, is only granting continued use of the cap on a short-term basis while it waits to see if it can become more comfortable with the situation, Gale speculated.
Although Allen is optimistic, engineers say it's too early to conclude that the cap is working.
Now that the reservoir of the Macondo well is flowing, the pressure could be rising because the temperature could be rising in the chamber, Gale said. Although later in the day, BP Senior Vice President Kent Wells said the temperature of the well has been consistent.
It's also possible, Gale said, that gas hydrate crystals could be plugging any holes in the underground portion of the well, and they could get dislodged as pressure builds.
"The increase in pressure could be a total red herring," Gale said.
Meanwhile, Gale's mentor, Berkeley engineering professor Bob Bea, has very little confidence in what's been said publicly about the seeps.
He's troubled that we're just now hearing about seeps three kilometers away, because a survey of the seabed conducted before BP drilled its well didn't indicate anything like that.
"There was nothing that indicated the presence of such a seep," Bea said. "I wonder why we're just now finding that out?"
BP has yet to release other ROV video that Bea's study group requested more than a month ago about what may have been shots of nearby seeps.
And Bea is especially concerned about the bubbles at the base of the blowout preventer. He said that BP does not appear to have installed a casing hanger lock, opening the possibility that gas and liquids could make their way up through the casing to the seabed.
Also, the mysterious second pipe that was revealed to be stuck in the blowout preventer when BP cut off the riser pipe a few weeks ago could have actually been a section of the liner material from the bottom part of the well, leaving open the possibility that an entire section of the well could be missing down below, Bea said. At this point, we don't know because the mysterious second pipe fell back down into the well last week when BP was removing equipment in preparation for the capping stack.
"I wish we had more information overall," Bea said, adding that the uncertain situation with the cap puts even more importance on the relief wells to permanently shut down the renegade Macondo well.
Wells, the BP official, said Monday afternoon that the first relief well is at a depth of 17,862 feet. It's four feet to the side of the original well, and is "perfectly positioned" at the right angle to intercept it. On Wednesday and Thursday, Wells said, BP will run the casing and then will cement it. After it cures, the company will be ready to drill the final feet to intercept the well, hopefully by the end of July.
Meanwhile, Allen and Wells, in their separate conference calls, introduced a new option for keeping the well under control until the relief wells are completed: a static kill.
In May, BP tried a dynamic "top kill," whereby it pumped massive amounts of drilling mud at high rates of speed into the blowout

preventer to try to suppress the flow of oil. Now that the well is at least temporarily contained with the cap, the company may try a "static kill," in which it can get away with pumping mud at lower pressures and rates of speed because it doesn't have to work as hard to gain control of the oil.
Wells said his company will decide whether or not to pursue the static kill in the next few days. Even if it is successful, it would move forward with plans to cement the well through the relief well, but the static kill would make that job easier.

Oil relief well inches closer; cap remains in place (Press-Register)

July 20, 2010, 5:00 AM

"Seepage," "anomalies" and other possible leaks discovered recently at the ocean bottom appear inconsequential and unlikely to threaten the stability of BP PLC's capped well, officials with the government and BP said Monday.

As a result, the well cap will remain closed, at least into today and possibly longer, they said.

Giving similar reports during separate news conferences, the company and the government appeared to have patched a rift highlighted on Sunday by a strongly worded letter sent by the top government official overseeing the spill to a BP executive.

"We have very good debates," BP Senior Vice President Kent Wells said Monday, explaining away the previous discord. "It's what you'd expect when you bring a lot of scientists and engineers together. It's kind of what you want."

Officials from both camps also increasingly discussed using a "static kill" to choke the well, a variation of the failed "top kill" that engineers say could now be easier, thanks to the closed cap.

Wells cautioned that planning for this procedure, which involves pumping drilling mud through the cap to the well bore below, remains "in its infancy."

With the well in its fourth day capped and no longer spewing 1.5 to 2.5 million gallons of oil into the Gulf daily, skimmers previously stationed in waters above the gusher moved closer to Gulf Coast shores to protect beaches and marshes, Coast Guard Adm. Paul Zukunft said in a conference call.

Alabama may need that help in coming days.

The main body of the oil spill, while still projected to be many miles from Alabama by Wednesday, continued a gradual, northward push, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"Oil is now approaching the Mississippi River Delta region," Zukunft said.

Monday brought scattered reports of oil sheen and tarballs littering waters and beaches across Alabama.

At Fort Morgan, about 100 workers sifted sand for tarballs, some working among shoreline vegetation some 30 feet above the tide line. The brown globs lined the water's edge along the peninsula.

Oil sheen was reported in waters along most of the Baldwin County coast, lines of mousse were seen floating in the waters of lower Mobile Bay and tarballs were found as far west as Bayou La Batre.

Meanwhile, a tropical wave produced choppy seas and strong winds near Puerto Rico on Monday, but retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, the national incident commander over the oil spill, expressed little concern that it would affect their efforts.
"There is a very, very weak depression to the east of the Lower Antilles that we're watching," Allen said. "But I think at this point this morning, I believe NOAA rated a 10 percent chance or less that it might develop into anything that would be consequential to our operations."

Those operations continued along several simultaneous tracks Monday, including detailed monitoring of the capped well, preparation of additional siphoning capacity should the cap be opened, planning for the possible static kill and work on relief wells -- the long-planned permanent solution to the leak.

The first relief well has been dug 17,864 feet below the Gulf surface and is now just a few feet horizontally from the well shaft, according to government reports.

Once officials tap into the shaft, they plan to blast in mud and cement to block off the well for good. A second relief well has also been drilled and will likely be called into action should the first one fail.

Allen on Monday gave more details of suspected leaks made public in his Sunday letter to BP, saying they were being monitored but didn't appear to pose a serious threat.

Small amounts of oil and gas started coming from the cap late Sunday. Also, seepage from the seafloor was detected over the weekend less than two miles away, but Allen said that probably has nothing to do with the well.

Allen emphasized over the weekend that capping the well was only a temporary test that would eventually be stopped in favor of returning to siphoning the oil.

But officials have said that transition could take a matter of days, during which millions more gallons of oil could spew into the Gulf.

On Monday, Allen edged a bit closer to BP's stated hope -- that the cap could remain on until the completion of a relief well. Allen said he would evaluate the cap on a daily basis but did not eliminate the possibility that it could stay on until the well is finally killed.

Zukunft said earlier in the day that the government had not planned initially to keep the well cap closed indefinitely.

The White House said Monday that Vice President Joe Biden will visit Alabama on Thursday. Details of the trip were not disclosed, but a

spokesman said Biden "will assess the administration's efforts to counter the BP oil spill and visit with Gulf residents impacted by the spill."

Also, Mississippi announced it would reopen its waters on Tuesday -- from the Louisiana to the Alabama borders -- to recreational catch-and-release fishing and live bait shrimping. Much of the state's waters had been closed to fishing entirely.

Federal officials directed that BP deploy representatives across the Gulf Coast, so the company can more rapidly commit resources to state and local oil response officials.

Todd Stacy, press secretary for Alabama Gov. Bob Riley, said the state has few complaints about BP in that regard.

"I can't think of anything that the state has asked for, that the governor has asked for, from BP that we haven't gotten," Stacy said.

CLAIMS

Ken Feinberg, czar of the gulf (Washington Post)

By Dana Milbank

July 20, 2010

Ken Feinberg is just the sort of dictator America needs right now.

The fast-talking lawyer with the Boston accent has had some of the best titles in government, or anywhere else: 9/11 special master, pay czar and now the 20 Billion Dollar Man, in charge of doling out BP's money to Gulf Coast residents.

In these days of populist rage, it's a dangerous business being a "czar" who answers to nobody. But Feinberg wears the imperial crown proudly. "I'm totally independent," he told a gathering of the Economic Club of Washington on Monday morning. "I do not answer to the administration, nor to BP."

The Economic Club's president, David Rubenstein of the Carlyle Group, asked Czar Feinberg if he needs legislation or guidance "from any other authority" to do his job.

"Guidance is fine," he said. "We don't need any legislation. . . . Ultimately it's my call."

Feinberg, who said under questioning that his work as the 9/11 special master was "a gift to the country," referred to himself in the second person as he described exchanges with hypothetical supplicants.

"Mr. Feinberg, I own a restaurant in the North End of Boston. I have the best shrimp scampi in the city. I can't get gulf shrimp. Where's my money?"

"Highly unlikely," Feinberg answered Feinberg.

"Mr. Feinberg, I own a motel on the beach. There's oil there, and I've lost customers."

"Pay them. Pay the claim," Feinberg ordered.

"I own a golf course 50 miles from the gulf. I'm down 30 percent. People aren't coming to play golf."

"Dubious," Feinberg ruled.

Rubenstein dared to ask his guest an impertinent question: "Ken, do you ever have any self-doubt?" Audience members laughed. Feinberg said doubt is "a good thing; just make sure it doesn't paralyze you."

There is no danger of this happening to Feinberg. His brash style is both refreshing (he gets things done far more efficiently than government bureaucrats ever could) and unsettling (he's neither confirmed by Congress nor accountable to President Obama). As with the independent commission to solve the debt crisis, Feinberg represents another handoff of authority to the unelected by a government that can't solve big problems.

Obama's use of unaccountable "czars" is no worse than his predecessor's, but the opposition has long complained about it. In the case of the BP escrow fund that Feinberg administers, a few prominent conservatives have even seen a (dubious) precedent in Hitler's rise in Germany.

"That's ridiculous. That's ridiculous," Feinberg said in typical form when asked about the Nazi comparison. "I mean, in comparison to that, it's ridiculous." In fact, Feinberg judged, "I don't see any justifiable criticism."

Yet there *is* something almost extragovernmental about what Feinberg does, and the special master admits that his activities are special. "Every once in a while there is a public policy dilemma that requires public policymakers to think out of the box," he said Monday, describing his function as a "creative alternative to conventional thinking." And conventional governing.

Feinberg told the economics group that he would not turn over individuals' financial information to the IRS. Even his own pay, from BP, is "between myself and BP," he said. He explained how his special status allows him to continue making money in his private law practice. He said with some pride that he hasn't "dealt with anybody at the White House," and that he interacts with Treasury officials only "at my request."

At the moment, Feinberg is giving Gulf Coast residents a hard sell to keep them out of court. To those who would rather sue, he says: "You're crazy to do so. . . . I'll be much more generous than any court would be." Marketing phrases tumble from his lips: "You're under no obligation. . . . Come in and immediately receive a check. . . . If you decide after that to litigate, you still keep the check."

The 64-year-old Feinberg has an impressive résumé of special masterships, resolving payments for Agent Orange, asbestos and the Virginia Tech shooting, among others. He delivered his standard joke on Monday about how his wife doesn't mind him being a special master but declines to be identified as a "special mistress."

Certainly, Feinberg enjoys his special powers. He referred to the period of the BP oil spill before he was appointed as "pre-me." He spoke of Citigroup, Bank of America and Chrysler being "under my thumb." He told the audience that "I'm very popular these days" among vendors seeking some of his fund's billions.

Popular enough to confer that second-person status on himself. "Mr. Feinberg, I don't know what I'm going to do," he told the audience, putting himself in the position of still another hypothetical supplicant. "I'm a sixth-generation oyster harvester, and my oyster-harvesting days are over. Now, what are you going to do for me?"

Relax, oysterman. Feinberg is a benevolent dictator.

MISCELLANEOUS

BP's fine could hit the billions (CNN)

By Steve Hargreaves

July 20, 2010: 3:47 AM ET

NEW YORK -- Just how much will BP pay in fines to the U.S. government? In a worst case scenario, they could top $18 billion.
BP (BP) has already announced a $20 billion fund to compensate disaster victims. But it will also owe a huge amount in fines for violating the Clean Water Act: Up to $4,300 per barrel of oil released if it's found the company was negligent in causing the disaster, according to a Justice Department spokesman.
No one has a precise number for how much oil has spewed into the Gulf. The Coast Guard originally said it was just 1,000 barrels a day. That figure has since been revised up to between 35,000 and 60,000 barrels a day.
Taking the high end of that estimate - over 4.3 million barrels of oil released since the spill began - the fines could total over $18 billion, and that's accounting for the 800,000 or so barrels BP had said it has captured.
Given BP's massive size (it made nearly $17 billion last year alone) and the fury it's generated among the voting public, the company is an easy target.
"BP should be held fully accountable under the law, and that's the law," said a spokesman for Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., when asked if $18 billion was really a reasonable fine.
A BP spokesman confirmed the company could be liable for up to $4,300 per barrel of oil released, but declined to speculate on the amount of the total fine.

Some local fishermen banking on more BP cleanup work (WWL TV)
July 19, 2010 at 10:26 PM
NEW ORLEANS -- Even if charter captain Theofile Bourgeois decides to fish waters that are open, he says his business has dried up.
"By this time of year, normally it would be easy, between 75 - 100 phone calls -- you know, questions on fishing -- where can we go, I'm coming to New Orleans," Bourgeois said. "Whereas now, it's one or two calls a day." And he believes the situation could continue for at least three years.
So, Bourgeois is focused now on doing what he can to make ends meet through work with BP. He enrolled in the Vessels of Opportunity program, but he's looking for even more.
In recent days, Bourgeois says he's been hammering out a contract with the company to utilize a device he created. It's a machine designed to help cleanup crews retrieve boom much more quickly.
"Whatever the cards are dealt to you, you gotta play 'em," Bourgeois said. "So, fishing has been my business for 16 years. It's not an option anymore. Right now, oil is here and the cleanup is here. So, I have a special interest. It's in our backyard. It's what I do for a living."
It's a similar situation for Joseph Enclade, who doesn't expect to get back to shrimping any time soon.
"We're working out there trying to save our waters and our land and everything we got out there," he said. "We got a lot of investment in this thing."
Despite the long hours and hard work, fishermen we talked with say working for BP is their only option these days.
"All we can do is pray that they're gonna keep helping us out until something comes back," Enclade said.
Theofile Bourgeois said he has simply diversified his business. Instead of taking charter tours out -- he and his crew are now working on an entirely new skill set.
"Hopefully my guys have a little more longevity, because we exercise each day -- doing what we need to do to be more efficient, and be more professional in the water, and knowing our job. Our job right now is oil. It used to be redfish and speckled trout, now it's oil."

Oil spill/health: At least 84 people treated for oil-related health issues (Press Regsiter)
July 19, 2010, 11:29 AM
MOBILE, Ala. -- At least 84 people have gone to local emergency rooms, clinics and urgent care centers since May 14 complaining of ailments thought to be related to the oil spill, Alabama Department of Public Health officials reported today.
That compares with 43,438 patients treated for non-trauma care overall during that period. Health officials are conducting surveillance across the state to monitor effects related to the spill at more than 20 sites in Mobile and Baldwin counties.
Forty-one of the patients complaining of oil-caused symptoms were exposed via inhalation, 24 by contact, three through ingestion, nine patients reported multiple exposures, and seven were exposed indirectly, according to the Alabama Department of Public Health.
Direct exposures are exposures to oil or oil by-products through contact, inhalation or ingestion, according to public health officials.
Indirect exposures occur because of other circumstances associated with the oil spill.
For example, heat exhaustion during cleanup efforts or mental health concerns such as anxiety or depression, would be examples of indirect exposure, said Dr. Thomas Miller, with the Alabama Department of Public Health.

OIL INDUSTRY

Deadly Gulf blowouts persist (Houston Chronicle)
By ERIC NALDER
July 19, 2010, 9:07PM

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Dangerous and short-tempered subterranean gases have erupted to kill 29 oil drillers since 1979, and despite repeated recommendations aimed at quelling blowouts, years and even decades have passed as accidents continued unabated.
The Houston Chronicle reviewed 66 blowouts in the Gulf of Mexico — one of the most dangerous places on Earth to drill for oil — and found that time and again, federal investigators' calls for improvement were either largely ignored or delayed amid industry consternation.
In the last 10 years, blowouts triggered explosions on five rigs in the Gulf, a minefield of Mississippi mud deposits, and caused the evacuation of 17, according to the Chronicle's examination of scores of documents.
Blowouts, known technically as "loss of well control incidents," range in seriousness from slow old leakers to explosive killers that can open the earth and swallow a rig while spewing gas, drilling mud, water vapor, sand and oil.
There are so many man-made holes in the Gulf, 50,000, that the government has lost track of at least 4,500 old wells, records show.
And preventing blowouts may be more difficult than curbing airline disasters. Unlike airplanes, no two wells are alike. Building an oil well is like building a ship in an opaque bottle, threading massive pipes and intricate tools through a dark, narrow hole.
Documents show the top two causes of blowouts are failed cement jobs and surprise encounters with shallow gas pockets. Also common are well-design mistakes and poor maintenance.
Yet, solutions have been elusive, according to records.
"The administrative process has gotten extremely burdensome," said Alan Spackman, vice president of the International Association of Drilling Contractors, adding that it takes too long for the government to change regulations. Spackman once worked as a Coast Guard marine safety officer.
Jo Ann Freeman needs no convincing. Her husband, Ben Freeman, 61, was killed in 2001 even as oil executives and government

bureaucrats pondered for years an equipment requirement that might have saved his life.
Freeman told his wife as he headed for the waters off the Texas coast that he was "going to a bad job." During his second week on location aboard the jack-up rig Marine IV, the crew encountered natural gas 90 feet sooner than expected 26 miles off Surfside Beach. Shortly before dawn, hell blasted up the drill pipe.
Thirty-nine crew members drifted in escape capsules before noticing Freeman was missing. He was last seen helping others down slippery stairs, and his body was never found. Over 35 years, Freeman had risen from roughneck to high-paid consultant.
Mineral Management Services records show the blowout preventer failed because a section of drill pipe jammed inside it, preventing it from closing over the gas geyser. The blowout preventer lacked a "blind shear ram" specifically designed for such jams.
When it works properly, the shear ram cuts through most pipe jammed in a BOP so it can control a wild well.
During the 25 years leading up to Freeman's death, shear rams might have prevented a dozen other blowouts that caused nine deaths, records show. As a result, federal agencies including the U.S. Coast Guard and MMS on six occasions had recommended requiring them on rigs like the Marine IV.
Fight over shear ram rule
The oil industry successfully opposed it, citing costs and worries that shear rams might hamper other well-control efforts or cut pipe needlessly. Even after Freeman died, the peril continued.
Nineteen months later, 600 feet of steel tubing jammed a BOP during an Anadarko operation. An Anadarko spokesman said the BOP complied with federal regulations, even without a shear ram. Again, MMS accident investigators recommended requiring them.
Not until 2006 did the shear ram become the rule.
"Certainly in hindsight it makes sense," admitted Spackman, whose group opposed it at the time.
In the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon blowout, Spackman and others say more rule changes are needed. Upgrading blowout preventers isn't enough, he said, because "when you get to the point of using it, a lot of other things have gone wrong."
A cementing failure likely contributed to the Deepwater Horizon disaster. MMS attempted in 2000 to create new regulations to prevent cementing failures, but records show it faced opposition from the Offshore Operators Committee, representing 70 companies in offshore exploration and oil and gas production.
OOC executive director Allen Verret wrote at the time: "We have serious reservation with MMS prescribing any type of 'Best Cementing Practices.' "
Verret told the Chronicle the industry prefers guidelines to prescriptions: "It hasn't been uncommon for there to be some sort of knee-jerk reaction by government. They throw a lot of stuff at the wall. Some sticks and some doesn't."
The other leading cause of Gulf blowouts, the shallow gas problem, has plagued drillers for 50 years. Gases roam the Gulf's subsea geology, moving from crevice to crevice, launching surprise attacks on drillers who don't detect them before starting operations. The vapors change locations because of natural forces and even drilling activities.
Crater swallows ship
The hazard hit the headlines back in 1964, when a blowout near Louisiana set fire to the C.P. Baker drill ship and opened a crater that literally swallowed it. After C.P. Baker, devices were required on rigs that divert gases safely out to sea, away from the machinery.
However, certain pre-drill tests weren't required on wells planned near existing holes on the theory the hazards would be clear, though MMS repeatedly recommended conducting them.
A Chevron crew was surprised by shallow gas in April 2003, just 100 feet from the tracks of four previous wells. Records show shallow gas caused or contributed to 10 blowouts in the last decade.
In 2001 and 2002, two rigs were set ablaze in 18 months, one a BP operation and the other Forest Oil. Both companies declined comment.
The government sent out a notice to oil field lessees calling for more testing in 2008, 44 years after C.P. Baker.
A 2008 Chevron blowout appears in hindsight to have been a rehearsal for Deepwater Horizon and its design problems. Like BP, Chevron was in the final stages of drilling a well aboard Transocean rig Discoverer Deep Seas. A blowout spewed 500,000 gallons of drilling mud onto the ocean floor.
Afterward, Chevron adopted its own well-design guidelines for deepwater operations - guidelines that might have prevented the Macondo well disaster had BP adopted them. Key was a casing pipe, or "tieback string," not employed on Macondo, that provides superior barriers against blowouts, records show.
But federal regulators did not issue a safety alert to other companies.
Maintenance woes afflict wells of all types. On a modern deepwater BP well in May 2003, the entire riser pipe, which connects the floating rig to the wellhead, broke apart because of a failed joint, reports say.
Because of that close call with a blowout, MMS investigators recommended twice-a-year thorough inspections of deepwater risers, rather than one.
No such change has been made to the industry standard, according to the American Petroleum Institute.

Oil rig engineer testifies about power failures (Los Angeles Times)

July 20, 2010

Months before the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon that killed 11 men, the sophisticated drilling vessel experienced power blackouts, computer glitches and a balky propulsion system, and carried a list of more than 300 deferred maintenance projects.

Under withering questioning during Monday's resumption of the Coast Guard- Interior Department investigation into the well blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, the rig's chief engineer revealed the possibility that alarms and other crucial systems were bypassed or not functioning at the time of the explosion.

His testimony also introduced a sensational detail: As crew members scrambled onto life rafts to abandon the crippled rig, the vessel's captain ordered an injured man to be left behind. The injured worker was eventually loaded onto a life raft and evacuated.
The day's first witness, chief engineer Stephen Bertone, was questioned sharply by panel members from the Coast Guard and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, who laid out a pattern of lax maintenance on the Deepwater Horizon, owned by Transocean and leased to BP.

The engineer said the rig had been experiencing mechanical failures for months before the explosion. Bertone, an employee of Transocean, said the vessel's thruster, or propeller system, had been "having problems" for the previous eight months. In addition, the computer station where the rig's driller sits had temporarily lost electrical power days before the blowout, he said.

Bertone said on the night of the explosion, he heard no general alarm, there were no internal communications and no power to the engines, and none of the Deepwater Horizon's backup or emergency generators were working.

"We were a dead ship," he said.

Because there was no power, the crew was unable to engage the emergency disconnect system that would have halted the flow of oil from the wellhead.

He said there was at least one incident earlier in the day that had foreshadowed what was to come. While taking BP and Transocean officials on a tour, Bertone saw a large group in the drill shack, an unusual number of people crammed into a small space.

"I had a feeling something wasn't right," Bertone said, adding that he was told to keep the tour moving and didn't hear anything further about problems with the well.

Under questioning from BP attorney Richard Godfrey, Bertone said that the entire Deepwater Horizon rig had lost electrical power in the past. He described it as a "partial blackout," and said rig-wide electrical failures had occurred two or three times before the explosion. He did not say how long the failures had lasted.

Panel co-chairman Jason Mathews of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement sought to portray managers of the drilling rig as having trouble keeping up with routine maintenance because of frequent employee turnover.

The Deepwater Horizon was scheduled to be sent to a shipyard for maintenance in early 2011, a point that Mathews bore in on, despite frequent objections from attorneys representing Transocean. A maintenance audit conducted by BP in September 2009 — seven months before the disaster — found 390 maintenance jobs undone, requiring more than 3,500 hours of work. The report referred to the amount of deferred work as "excessive."

In questioning Bertone, Ronnie Penton, the attorney for the Deepwater Horizon's chief electronics technician, implied that some of the vessel's safety monitoring systems were regularly bypassed, including a general alarm and a device that purged trapped gas from the drilling shack. Another attorney implied that the gas-purging device, which is designed to expel any unanticipated buildup of natural gas, had not been operating for five years.

A sudden surge of natural gas from the well is believed to have caused the explosion, according to previous testimony and investigation documents.

In May, Douglas Brown, the rig's chief mechanic, testified that he believed a sudden influx of gas onto the rig's deck caused an engine to rev uncontrollably and touch off an explosion. A system to stop that scenario was not functional at the time, he said.

"If I would have shut down those engines, it could have stopped [them] as an ignition source," he told the panel.

Also in Monday's hearing, an attorney for Halliburton asked Leo Linder, a drilling fluid specialist, if gauges monitoring the drilling mud had been bypassed. Linder said he did not know.

Bertone testified to two incidents that called into question the conduct of Capt. Curt Kuchta immediately after the explosion. Bertone said Kuchta admonished a crew member for activating a distress signal. Then, as rig workers were climbing aboard a life raft, the captain gestured toward a stricken man lying on a gurney and said, "Leave him!"

The captain's remarks were contained in a statement Bertone made to the Coast Guard in the hours after the incident, a document that has not been made public. The introduction of his statement prompted a lengthy and sometimes heated exchange among attorneys.

Signs of the times: Oil-spill victims on Grand Isle post protest (Washington Post)
By Ylan Q. Mui
July 20, 2010
GRAND ISLE, LA. -- SpongeBob SquarePants and his friends in Bikini Bottom have a message for the BP contractors, cleanup crews and news media that have descended on this small beach town where oil washes up almost daily.
"Seriously . . . When Can We GO BACK IN THE WATER?" they ask in a painting, staked on the side of the main road, that shows slivers of oil marring the ocean. "Don't Wish you were Here!!"
If you want to know how residents here feel about the oil spill, just read the signs that are posted on seemingly every electrical pole, planted in front yards or hung on the 10-foot stilts that keep houses off the ground in case of flooding. Some are funny, like the six-painting SpongeBob series or the old toilet labeled "BP Headquarters." Some are angry: "Cannot fish or swim. How the hell are we suppose [sic] to feed our kids now?" Others strain for pointed puns, dubbing BP the "Bayou Polluters."
Water is the center of life in Grand Isle, an eight-mile scrap of land standing between Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico that has been hard hit by the oil spill that followed the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig nearly three months ago. BP has dispatched hordes of contractors to the island to clean up the beaches and skim oil off the waters, and the TV cameras have followed. The signs are the handiwork of a feisty population that feels there is little else they can do to keep their culture and industry alive. Many of them cannot work because commercial fishing waters are closed, and they cannot play because the beaches are lined with miles of orange tiger boom to keep the oil at bay.
That means there is plenty of time to brainstorm new signs.
"I had to scream for help some kind of way," said Bobby Pitre, who crafted one of the most jarring displays. "It was like an SOS to the world."
Pitre created statues of a father and his little girl, cowering in fear, wearing oil-stained clothes and gas masks and holding a sign that says "God save us all." He placed them in front of his tattoo parlor, Southern Sting, on a prominent corner on the long road to Grand Isle. Soon, folks were stopping to take photos.
That inspired Pitre and his friend and co-worker, Eric Guidry, to paint murals along the front wall of the shop. They re-created the famous Obama "hope" poster and covered it with question marks and the words, "What Now?" They painted a water tower that now holds oil. And for a final touch, they turned a mannequin into a bloody torso and attached it to a billboard: "BP took our arms. The government is

taking our legs. How will we stand?" Pitre said the sign is a reference to commercial fishing closures and the deepwater drilling moratorium that have decimated the local economy.
"Those are the two things we thrive off of," Pitre said. "We really needed to get people's attention."
Perhaps this is just a region that wears its heart on its billboards. There are all manner of homemade signs along the winding state highways here, some fancier than others. One used blue spray paint on a white sign to warn drivers that "U-turners will be shot at." Another roadside billboard features the graduation photo of a newly minted lawyer with congratulations from assorted family members. Meanwhile, one sign expresses underlying racial tensions in this majority white community: "An illegal alien in Port Fouchon killed Nicholas," reads a sign in a front yard not far from Grand Isle. The jabs can also be directed inward. Several newer signs take aim at residents who have rented their homes -- they call them camps -- to BP contractors working on the cleanup.
"It's all about greed," say the orange letters scrawled on one wooden board. "Your [sic] not renting your camp, your [sic] destroying your community."
Grand Isle Mayor David Camardelle said the signs express the frustration that many residents feel with the pace of the cleanup and the flood of newcomers.
"They're afraid that all these contractors coming in, they don't know nobody," he said. "We're born and raised on this island. We leave our windows open, our keys in the car. The neighbors know each other. . . . It's not bad people, it's just a change of life."
Darleen Taylor is one of the roughly 1,400 full-time residents of Grand Isle, where she was born and raised. The oil spill put her four brothers out of work as fishermen, so they joined BP's cleanup crew.
They try to laugh at their misery, find humor in the horror of the worst environmental disaster of their lives. Which is how they started talking about SpongeBob.
The paintings were actually one of her brothers' idea, Taylor said. They were making a family dinner underneath their house-on-stilts when her brother mentioned it would be funny if Patrick, the starfish who is SpongeBob's sidekick, mistook the oil for chocolate. If she painted it, he promised to put it in his front yard.
That became the first of six oily SpongeBob signs now on roadside display. Taylor used to paint scenes of cypress trees and egrets -- and yes, the occasional SpongeBob -- until Hurricane Katrina destroyed her home five years ago. Her husband half-jokingly said she had post-traumatic stress disorder. But she hasn't painted a single thing until now.
Taylor sets up her brush and canvas on the back porch of her rebuilt home in Grand Isle. It's quiet there, and she can see the marsh and Elmer's Island. The oil is barely visible, she said. Four more SpongeBob paintings are in the works.
"They all wait every weekend to see what's next," Taylor said.

REPAIR ATTEMPTS

BP's Kent Wells: "We're in a good position to not have a catastrophic event" (Times-Picayune)
July 19, 2010, 5:28 PM
By monitoring its Gulf of Mexico well closely, BP hopes to avoid a rupture of the well, BP senior vice president Kent Wells said.
"With this extensive monitoring we're having, we're in a good position to not have a catastrophic event," Wells said in a press briefing this evening.
BP has been closely monitoring the well's pressure to determine whether it is intact. Higher pressure readings are usually a sign that the well is intact. Lower pressure readings could indicate that oil is seeping from various points in the well.
A sharp drop in the well's pressure would "cause us to go into our 'opening of the well procedure,'" Wells said.
Wells confirmed Incident Commander Thad Allen's reporter earlier today that pressure readings in the well now stand at about 6,800 pounds per square inch.
"The pressure continues to steadily rise, and the important part is the steady," Wells said. "It's absolutely following the trend that we would expect."
Wells also said the first relief well is now at 17,862 feet beneath the ocean floor and is four feet away from BP's Macondo well horizontally. The relief well is still considered to be the most promising way of permanently shutting down the well. Wells said the relief well is on track to be complete in late July.
"At the end of the day, the relief well will be the ultimate solution," he said.
BP continues to monitor capped oil well (WALA TV)
July 20, 2010
MOBILE, Alabama (WALA) - CAN THE OIL BE CONTAINED?
So far, the containment cap on the Deepwater Horizon oil well has held but seeps of oil or natural gas have been detected around the well site. Incident Commander Thad Allen says BP can keep the cap on through Monday while closely monitoring those seeps.
UNDER PRESSURE
It's all a matter of pressure. The cap over the BP well has prevented oil from gushing at the well site, but pressure could be causing seeps further down the pipe.
University of South Alabama Geology Professor, Dr. Doug Haywick described what could be happening a mile below the oceans surface.
"If the pressure starts to drop down, that indicates that oil has started to work it's way around the side (of the well pipe). It's actually making pathway for more oil to follow along there," said Dr. Haywick
Dr. Haywick says if that's the case, it's a serious problem.
"If the pipe is damaged, oil is going to be working it's way up along the sides, but it's not a straight shot right up to the water. Now it's got to work it's way around the particles between the pipe. It might take hours, or days for the oil to finally make it's way to the surface," Dr. Haywick explained.
CLOSELY MONITORING
Determining if there is seepage is why what's being called a test is taking so long. If the cap is losing pressure engineers will have to go back to square one.
"In which case the best option may be to allow the cap to come off and start siphoning the oil off as they did earlier," Dr. Haywick said.
Whether the cap holds or it has to be removed Dr. Haywick says the ultimate solution is the relief wells. Those will shut off the pressure completely.
"That's the best way to shut it down at that point and then (pressure) is not going to be an issue," said Dr. Haywick.
So until the relief wells are successful, pressure will continue to be a constant worry.
DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN BP AND GOVERNMENT
Over the weekend, Incident Commander Thad Allen said oil should be siphoned from the containment cap to relieve pressure, while BP has said they want to keep the oil stopped up until the relief wells are complete.

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Subject: Media are invited to Attend Media Brief and Overflight

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Key contact numbers • Report oiled shoreline or request volunteer information: (866) 448-5816 • Submit alternative response technology, services or products: (281) 366-5511 • Submit your vessel for the Vessel of Opportunity Program: (866) 279-7983 • Submit a claim for damages: (800) 440-0858 • Report oiled wildlife: (866) 557-1401	**Deepwater Horizon Incident Joint Information Center** **Phone: (713) 323-1670** **(713) 323-1671**

Who: U.S Coast Guard CAPT Steven Poulin, Mobile, Ala., Incident Commander
What: Media briefing to provide update on ongoing Deepwater Horizon BP oil spill response efforts with follow-on over flight for interested participants
When: Wednesday, July 21, 2010, 9 a.m. CDT for brief; flight is at 10:30 a.m. CDT
Where: Incident Command Post, 1087 Downtowner Blvd., Mobile, Ala. 36601; flight is 8501 Tanner Williams Road, Mobile, Ala. 36609
Contact: Mobile Joint Information Center, 251-445-8965
NOTE: Media interested in attending brief and/or flight **must RSVP no later than 5 p.m. on Tuesday**, July 20, 2010 to the ICP Mobile Joint Information Center. Parking at the Incident Command Post is limited. Space on the flight is limited and will be awarded on a first-come, first-serve basis.

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UPDATED MEDIA ADVISORY: Media Brief and Teleconference to Provide Operational Update On Ongoing Deepwater Horizon/BP Oil Spill Response Efforts

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National Incident Commander Admiral Thad Allen's press briefing has been postponed until this afternoon.
Details will be provided as they become available.

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